

JANUARY 1

There seems to be something intrinsic in human nature that we must have some sort of an occasion before we take stock of things. We don't do it at random; rather, taking stock has a cause.

- Often it's a surprise. We take stock when something big happens. You can imagine the self-examination going on in Washington on the day after Pearl Harbor. They were counting beans, bullets and bombs.
- It also happens when something big happens to you — for example, when the baby is born. A failure to purchase enough diapers can be a major crisis, particularly at 3 o'clock in the morning. You knew it was coming; plan ahead.
- It also occurs at times honored by custom and tradition. These things are someone else's solution to a problem.

A customary time to take stock. They are more numerous than you think. The most obvious one is the one we are celebrating today, New Year's Day. We look at the calendar and it starts over. So we make resolutions — more often made and kept. But it is a recognized time were taking stock of ourselves and deciding what were going to do to improve things. Other such times are imposed by authority. You tend to take a good look at your finances around April 15, for example. And most of us also participate in an annual review process at our employer. But perhaps you didn't think about it, but communion is a time to take stock as well.

How should we do that?

- First, remember what Christ did for you. His sacrifice on the cross paid the price of atonement for your sins — and thus granted you salvation. At the very least you should be thankful. Extend that to see whether or not your life follows the pattern that He gave you.

- Then remember the price that was paid. The only truly innocent man to walk this planet was nailed to a cross at the will of the religious authorities of the time. He went voluntarily; he gave up his life voluntarily; he suffered voluntarily. This too is worth your remembering.
- Then examine yourself, and see if there is anything of which you need repentance and forgiveness.

Let the bread remind you of his body, broken for you. Let the cup remind you of his blood, shed so that you might have forgiveness. Let these drive your self-examination and repentance. Then partake in a worthy manner.

JANUARY 8

My father summed it up this way: "The dumbest thing California ever did was to televise the Rose Parade. Just think of it; all those farmers in Iowa, under 50 feet of snow, milking their cows to get ice cream and they see a bunch of girls in bikinis riding on floats made of flowers. It's a wonder there is anyone left in Iowa."

You can have a fair amount of empathy for the farmer. It's January 8; the New Year's parties are over and the weather hasn't changed. We are in the midst of the bleak midwinter season. But the farmer knows that spring arrives when spring arrives, and waits for it patiently. Like anyone who is waiting for a richly anticipated result, there is a certain pain to waiting.

The Christian has a larger version of this problem. At the institution of the Lord's supper, Christ told his apostles that he would return:

"But I say to you, I will not drink of this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it new with you in My Father's kingdom."

(Matthew 26:29 NASB)

So it is that our Lord tells us he will come back. The apostles were quite sure it would be a few weeks or months; a small number of years at the most. That was 2000 years ago. Injustice still rings in this world; we live in the bleak midwinter of human sin. So when is He going to return?

"Soon." The same answer he's been giving the church for 2000 years. How is this possible?

But do not let this one fact escape your notice, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years like one day.

(2 Peter 3:8 NASB)

It is our Lord's purpose that all possible should be saved. You are witnessing not his tardiness but his patience. It's just that his patience corresponds with our impatience.

Do not despair, Christian. Our Lord will return to judge the living and the dead. At his return Adolf Hitler will get what he deserves in the justice of God. Real Christians look forward to the return of our Lord with joy. One of the many purposes of communion is to remind you of that joy, to put you in mind of his return. It also gives you a chance to mend your relationship with Him. So examine yourself this morning, and see if there is something in you that needs remedy. Take it to you Lord; accept his forgiveness — then partake. The bread is his body; the cup, his blood. This he did for you so that you might have mercy on the day of judgment. Examine yourself; mend your relationship and then partake in a worthy manner.

JANUARY 8

And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth.
(John 1:14 NASB)

C. S. Lewis called the incarnation of Christ “the supreme miracle.” It is a fact; if there is no Christmas, there can be no Easter. The purpose of Christ coming to earth was to become the atonement for our sins.

No one else could do the job. You will recall when Abraham attempted to sacrifice his son Isaac, he explained to Isaac that “God would provide the sacrifice.” When the sacrifice must be absolutely perfect and limitless, only God can provide. It is a fundamental belief of all Christians that Jesus of Nazareth is God in the flesh, the Christ.

As John 3:16 tells us, this is a sign of God’s love for humanity. Only out of his great love could such a sacrifice be made. It is made even more significant by the fact that we are told that Jesus is the “Word,” the divine message to mankind. That message became flesh by the usual route. He was born as a baby in this world so that he might be Son of Man as well as son of God.

What can we learn of this verse?

- The “Word became flesh.” Jesus of Nazareth was fully human and fully God. Only he could be the perfect sacrifice for the atonement for mankind.
- He is the “only begotten.” Mankind makes cars, but begets children. He is the one and only, uniquely begotten of God and woman.
- The apostles “beheld his glory.” They walked and talked with this man for three years, more than long enough to know who he was. The Gospels are reliable witnesses to his character.

- He was “full of grace and truth.” Grace, the unmerited favor of God balanced by the truth of God. The one who will judge the world came to not to bring condemnation but salvation. He came to offer forgiveness.

So as you partake this morning, remember who was sacrificed on your behalf as the perfect atoning sacrifice. We often speak of “flesh and blood.” Remember that his flesh and his blood are represented here by the bread and the cup. This is the one who will be returning to judge the living and the dead. So that you might be prepared for his return at any time, you are encouraged to examine yourself at communion, and repent where necessary. “A broken and a contrite heart, O God, You will not despise.”

JANUARY 15

You probably never asked yourself this question, but it puzzled theologians in the early church for quite some time. Why did Jesus require his baptism at the hands of John the Baptist? John's baptism was a baptism of repentance, something Jesus did not need. So why did he do it?

John Chrysostom gave us the answer. He imagined an evangelist traveling through the countryside, baptizing new converts. A local nobleman refuses to be baptized because it is beneath him. After all, these peasants don't ever get a bath, but I get one once a week! The reply to this is fairly simple: if the King of Kings and Lord of Lords was baptized, surely you can be too.

This is an example of Christ being an example to us. Is often referred to as an exemplar for the reason that he set an example for us so that we might learn by imitating Him.

What kind of examples does he give us at the Cross?

- He gives us the example of innocent suffering on behalf of the guilty. How often have you seen it; someone with a drunken spouse suffering because of it. Someone is keeping the family together despite the problems that this causes — motivated by love.
- He gives us the example of faith in God the Father. He calmly predicted his resurrection, knowing that God had promised it. God keeps his promises, and we should trust him too.
- It is also an example of Christian leadership. A Christian leader is a servant leader who often has the privilege of suffering for the cause of Christ.

As you partake in communion today, remember that you are identifying with your Lord and Master. He gave you an example; he expects you to follow it.

He, the ultimate innocent, suffered on behalf of you, the sinner. It was his service to you, freely offered. He asks that you go and do likewise. Therefore, should you not resolve to share in that innocent suffering?

Jesus, the joy of man's desiring, the ideal example, has set before you the symbols of his suffering. You see the cup which represents his blood. You see the bread which represents his body. These are also the examples of his love for you. Follow his example and share that love by bearing one another's burdens.

JANUARY 22

Luke 7:36-50

Luke devotes a good deal of space to this particular story. It has many aspects to it; we can examine but one this morning.

Consider the example this woman sets for us:

- She knows she's a sinner. Most commentators state that she is a prostitute. Certainly the men in the room are not in doubt, though they are perturbed to have her present.
- She is a repentant prostitute; and she makes her contrition clear. She is seeking forgiveness in a highly visible, public way. She seems to understand that Christ is able to grant that forgiveness. She appeals to him without words.
- We will focus on this morning is Christ's last words to her: "Go in peace." He has already forgiven her, and then sends her away with those words.

Peace. It can mean many things.

- Our first definition might simply be the absence of conflict. The peace she has been given to such an absence, an absence of conflict with God. Note that this is a factual matter, not a feeling.
- We might also look at it is a state of mind. She is tranquil in her state of mind because she has peace with God.
- The process is described best by the word "reconciliation." You change; He approves; peace is established.

My father taught me that the war is not over just because you won the battle. The war is over when your enemy becomes your friend. When you reconcile with God, he becomes your friend. It was for this purpose Christ came.

Then Christ surprises her with his instruction. He doesn't tell her to offer a sacrifice; he doesn't tell her to say prayers. He tells her to go in peace. The matter is finished; the reconciliation is done — she is now at peace with God.

Communion offers the same opportunity to the Christian.

- It begins with self-examination. Look at yourself; determine where the conflict is, identifying it clearly. You now know what you have to reconcile.
- Once that's done, offer your repentance to God with specific plans to make amends.
- Go in peace. Realize in your mind that you are not in conflict with God, but are forgiven.

There is something climactic about "Go in peace." Christ does not challenge us to bold new adventures, but to go about our way reconciled to Him. As you partake, see in the bread and the cup the body and blood which paid the atonement price for your sins. Accept that atonement and be reconciled to God — then go in peace.

JANUARY 29

Luke 7:36-50

It is a common thing these days to have an electronic calendar on your PC or smart phone. The software has been around for quite some time, but remains in common use because of its value to us.

- First of all, of course, it serves as a reminder of our important dates and appointments. It tells you where you're supposed to be and when you're supposed to be there.
- Next, it keeps a list of addresses and phone numbers with a much better memory than you have.
- Finally, most electronic calendars also include a to-do list. It's a convenient reminder of what you're supposed to do — and the deadline you have to meet.

Curiously, however, while the calendar offers you reminders it does very little to nothing about instructing you. You don't really learn anything from a calendar; you are reminded of things. There is wisdom in this. To paraphrase Samuel Johnson, people don't need instruction nearly as much as they need reminders.

Communion is just such a reminder as well. We do it on a regular basis so that we will be reminded of the important things in the faith. For example:

- Communion reminds us of the incarnation of Christ, the fact that he is God in the flesh. Both fully God and fully man, he understands our needs and can do something about them.
- Communion reminds us of the atonement of Christ. The purpose of the incarnation was to give to us the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Our forgiveness depends on his atonement. So we remember his sacrifice on the Cross.

- Communion reminds us of his coming again to judge the living and the dead. His followers will receive their reward; the evil will get what they deserve. Until then, we are to observe the Lord's Supper on a regular basis.

In the bread you see his body, broken and wounded for us. In the cup you see his blood, shed for the forgiveness of our sins. Therefore, examine yourself and take this reminder with a pure heart. Remember, the pure in heart are those who can see God. See him in the bread and the cup.

FEBRUARY 5

One of the consistent contrasts between what the world teaches and what the church teaches concerns humility. The world teaches you the virtue of arrogance; “I’m better than you are.” The church teaches humility.

Humility is not something that can be swallowed, faked or painted on. It is a comparison; a comparison between you and either a problem you have or someone you’re competing with.

- Its chief defining characteristic is that it is an *honest* comparison, straightforward examination of the facts. If the honest facts are that the officer that pulled you over is the one carrying the ticket book, humility becomes a little more obvious.
- Humility, when practiced, obviously affects our actions. But consider that it also changes our character and in a large extent redefines our style. Humility shows.
- Humility is personal. It’s tougher for some of us than others, which sometimes leads to the habit of judging others for their lack of it. Judge not; it’s difficult enough for each of us.

This is why humility is recommended for communion. It is a comparison between you and The Son Of Man as to which of you is better suited to make atonement for your sins. Your sin separates you from God the Father; they must be paid for. So who does it?

- Only the rich can afford to perform the atonement. If you need bail money, you call your rich uncle first. Only the Son of God can pay this price.
- An atonement sacrifice must be pure; perfect purity is found only in the Son Of Man.
- What would motivate someone to perform the atonement sacrifice the cost his life? Only perfect love — and our love is not perfect.

Therefore, practice humility as you take communion. Start with the honest comparison — examine yourself. If repentance is required, commit to it before your Lord. Come to him with a pure heart.

In the bread and the cup, see the body and blood of Christ — a reminder of what he had to pay to be the sacrifice of atonement. It is the most important event in your eternal life; remember what he did for you.

Then, in a humble manner worthy of a repentant sinner, partake.

FEBRUARY 12

A common difficulty in the church today is that communion is considered “just a ritual.” If the biggest concern of those involved is the speed with which they can finish the task, you’re probably doing it the wrong way. Likewise if the details of the ritual are more important than anything else — adult males only, wearing a tie — you probably have the wrong focus. If you look at it is just a memorial, with no real effect on your life, you are missing the meaning of communion.

This is not a new problem. Paul had this difficulty with the Corinthian church:

Therefore whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner, shall be guilty of the body and the blood of the Lord. But a man must examine himself, and in so doing he is to eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For he who eats and drinks, eats and drinks judgment to himself if he does not judge the body rightly. For this reason many among you are weak and sick, and a number sleep. But if we judged ourselves rightly, we would not be judged. But when we are judged, we are disciplined by the Lord so that we will not be condemned along with the world.

(1 Corinthians 11:27-32 NASB)

You can see the result. You “drinks judgment to yourself.” It’s a self-inflicted wound. On the other hand, if you do it rightly (dare we say, take it seriously) you avoid judgment. How do you do that?

You exercise self-judgment. This is why you were told to examine yourself during communion, so that you will judge yourself and take corrective action. Corrective action also goes by the name of “repentance.” If you don’t do this, you face the judgment of God — and His discipline. Don’t be afraid of that; discipline in this context means something akin to saying someone is a “disciplined athlete.” The athlete doesn’t fear the discipline, but embraces it.

So what should we do?

- We begin by “discerning the body.” In this context it’s important to remember the difference between what a thing is and what it is made of. Communion is *made of* bread and wine/grape juice. Communion *is* the body and blood of Christ. That’s a big difference.
- Next, we judge ourselves. This is that self-examination which is so frequently mentioned in communion meditations. But self-examination alone is not sufficient; you must commit to repentance and then follow through.
- Finally, accept God’s forgiveness for your sins. He gave us the atonement so that we might have such forgiveness. Communion symbolizes that for us.

FEBRUARY 19

Almost every Hollywood movie has them. They are the people walking down the street, the people who were running from the monster were just standing in the elevator behind the protagonist. They are called “extras.” Their names are never credited, but they help tell the story the movie is portraying. We can learn something from the extras around the Crucifixion.

- Look at the soldiers. Just another day; just another set of orders from the boss. One of them remarked, “truly this is the Son of God.” But it seems to have had no effect on what he did that day; just following orders. As was customary, the soldiers got some free clothing that day.
- Consider the religious leaders. Their main concern was not justice or mercy but making sure that the religious law was followed and the bodies remove before the day of the Sabbath. The regulations, after all, are the regulations — straight from Moses.
- There was also the crowd — teaching their children by example that it was perfectly proper to mock the suffering, and it was fun also.

Ordinary people going through an ordinary day. People like us. How often have you said:

- “Hey, I’m just doing what the boss told me to do.” I have my orders; I’m covered.
- “That’s what the rules say; that’s why we have rules.” Whatever goes wrong from here on out is somebody else’s fault.
- “Everybody’s doing it.” Seems to happen a lot, doesn’t it?

You can see it; in a way, we were there with them — sinners all of us. The amazing thing is that Christ was died for the salvation of exactly such sinners — including us.

Communion is a reminder of what he did on our behalf. That day, the spear pierced his side and his blood flowed. We see that, symbolically, in the cup that is before us. His body was broken for us so that we might be saved. That is symbolized in the bread.

As you partake this morning, take an honest look at yourself. See if you fit in with the crowd, the soldiers or the leaders. Confess your sins to Him, and then rely on his love for your forgiveness.

FEBRUARY 26

Most of us have sent a child to summer camp at one time or another. Often enough for Christians it is a Christian camp; but there are other kinds. One such a camp, which catered exclusively to the children of the rich, got a nasty surprise one day. Naturally, the staff were always quite concerned with maintaining their reputation is being the best in class. You can imagine how perturbed they would be to see 50 or 60 motorcycles coming up the pathway to the camp, the riders are all clad in motorcycle leather. Not the kind of thing you want leaking to the press!

All turned out well, however. The motorcycle gang — “The Capitalist Tools” — had as its leader one Malcolm Forbes, one of the richest men in America and the founder of Forbes magazine. He had just dropped by to visit his granddaughter (who vouched for him.)

It is typical of human beings that they are conscious of their reputation. Often enough, this is rooted in the feeling that somehow one person is superior to another. We like the feeling of being “better” than someone else.

Perhaps we might ask, then, why there is no trace of this in communion. You can kind of imagine how silly it would look. Attendants — clad in tuxedos, of course — would ask you what kind of communion you want. Did you want the economy model, with the Styrofoam cracker and grape juice? Or perhaps the standard model — upgrade to wine and a genuine cracker? Or even all the way up to the deluxe model — a vintage wine and handmade, artisan crackers. It’s a little hard to imagine that, isn’t it?

So why do we serve the same communion to everyone?

- We are all one in Christ Jesus (Galatians 3:28).
- Communion is not about us; it’s about Him. He specified no levels or preference in it.

- Communion is a look back at the *finished* work of Christ in the atonement. We are remembering what he did, and thanking him for it.

Knowing this, how are we to take communion? First, examine yourself — not those who are around you. Their sins, faults and failures are their own; your own are sufficient to deal with. Next, reflect on the price Christ paid for your salvation — the suffering, bleeding and dying on the cross. Then, accept his forgiveness which he freely offers to all who believe. Partake, with a pure heart.

MARCH 5

There is a certain pattern to the monuments of this world. Consider Mount Rushmore, for example. It's probably as successful a monument as exists in this world, at least for most Americans. We can see certain characteristics that make it so:

- It's made of stone, literally carved out of a mountain. Mountains tend to last a long time.
- The message that it tries to convey is quite simple and direct. It honors four American presidents by portraying them in stone carving. It is, therefore, easy to understand. The form of the monument fits the function quite well.
- The monument causes you to think. In this particular instance you question why these four presidents were selected for this. What do Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln and Theodore Roosevelt have in common that deserve such a memorial?
- Finally, the memorial is designed to last approximately forever. It's not made out of tissue paper but stone still set in a mountain. Mountains and stone last a long, long time.

Compare that, if you will, to communion. We look at a memorial in stone but in communion we consume the memorial. There are some similarities, however.

- The materials — starting with grapes and wheat — will be around for a long, long time; probably as long as there are farmers.
- The form of the memorial is designed to provoke your memory. The cup reminds you of His blood and the bread reminds you of His body.
- Communion causes you to think; at least you should ask why we are doing this. Better yet, ask what impact it should have on your life.
- Interestingly, communion is NOT designed to last forever. It will end at Christ's return.

That last is almost unique in human experience. Here is a memorial which is designed to stop at a particular time in history. When? I wish I knew. But of course we know the event that signals this: the return of our Lord.

It is then that you will find out whether or not communion has achieved its purpose in your life. For in communion you are to examine yourself and consider your own repentance. If you have done this successfully, your Lord will reward it. If you took it is simply something we have to do, of no significance, you should understand the consequences of that.

One purpose of communion is to produce anew a pure heart, so that when he returns you may See God. Therefore, take the time to examine yourself and bring to him anything you find in need of remedy. His cleansing is certain; his forgiveness is sure — until he returns.

MARCH 12

The grave of many a plan to read through the Bible in a year is found in the book of Leviticus. It seems to be one large collection of small regulations which, 3000 years later, seemed to have no relationship to the Christian life. It is only when we remember that many of these things are pictures of what is to come that we can learn from. One example of this is the Day of Atonement, detailed in Leviticus chapter 16. Let's take a look at what the High Priest does on the Day of Atonement.

- He brings a sin offering, both for himself and for the people.
- He goes through ritual cleansing, both himself and his priestly clothing.
- He brings two goats, one to be the atonement and the other to be the scapegoat.
- He produces a thick cloud of incense.
- He uses blood to ceremonially cleanse the Holy Place.
- He confesses the sins of the people over the scapegoat.

All this seems like just so much legalistic ritual until you look at it from the point of view of Christ coming. Christ is our sin offerings, sacrificed at the cross for all of us. It was made by the one sinless man to walk this planet. He served both as atonement sacrifice and scapegoat. The offering looks backwards to our sins; the scapegoat means God will remember them no more. And of course, it is by his blood we are cleansed.

But some of the things in this ritual also picture the nation of royal priests, the church.

- One such aspect is confessing our sins. Communion includes the time of self-examination in which this should be done.

- We are told that incense represents the prayers of the saints (Revelation 5:8). Let us bring our intercessory prayers to Him.
- And as we go through the week, let us wear the clean linen of the saints which we are told represents our righteous acts (Revelation 19:8).

More than 3000 years ago God had already planned the atonement for us. He showed the ancient Jews what it was like in the hopes they would recognize the real thing when they saw it. They pictured it in a ritual; we remember it as a memorial ceremony. Examine your sins and repent; then go forth with intercessory prayers and righteousness displayed to the world.

MARCH 19

Joshua 2

One of life's more "interesting" experiences is the privilege of living one floor above a house of prostitution. Your author was serving in the army at the time, and our options for housing were somewhat limited. To answer the first obvious question, yes, the location was marked by a red light — and a good deal of trash such as broken beer bottles and other party materials. The occupants, or should I say proprietors, were also very proud of their sexual exploits. They would personally regale you with tales of odd forms of sex which they always assumed you wanted to hear. Hollywood portrays the house of prostitution is a place full of sexy looking, willing women, taking the shortcut to success. The reality is a lot more dismal.

One of the things that comes through when you talk to such people is a sense of complete hopelessness. They will tell you that they are whores and have no chance of changing. They see no way to escape the lifestyle.

Perhaps that's how Rahab felt when the Israelite spies came to her. The scarlet cord in her time serve the same function as the red light in ours. She knew what God had done and dreaded the future in Jericho. She also clearly understood that Israel did not condone prostitution; she may have felt that the future wasn't so bright in Israel either. There is a certain sense of resignation to living in the lifestyle not approved by those around you. But Rahab was given the chance, and she took it. If you ever have been down and out, you will probably understand.

Rahab's scarlet cord identified her as a prostitute, a sinner. But there's one thing we know about sinners: they can be saved. Just as the scarlet cord held her down in Jericho, it provided her escape when Jehovah came.

Communion shows forth a similar ambiguity. We say that we "celebrate" communion. We certainly remember what happened to cause communion. In

that sense, we celebrate the death of Christ on the cross. It is the greatest injustice in human history — and yet it is also the sign of the greatest mercy that man has ever known.

So as you partake this morning, remember both. Remember the death of Christ, in agony on the cross, paying the price of your sins. Remember also the grace of God, forgiveness of sins bought for us at that same cross. In the bread you see his body; in the cup, his blood. Forgiveness is come to you; grace is extended to you — but at what a price! Remember this today; remember it during the week and extend the offer of grace to anyone around you who will listen.

MARCH 26

There is a certain amount of sense to an observation from George Bernard Shaw: “The only man I know who behaves sensibly is my tailor; he takes my measurements anew each time he sees me. The rest go on with their old measurements and expect me to fit them.”

Carpenters have a similar expression: measure twice, cut once.

We bring this to your attention because it is particularly relevant at communion. Required as part of communion is self-examination. It should be relatively obvious that self-examination should be done on the basis of who you are today, rather than who you were a few months or years ago. Self-examination is the basis of repentance; the temptation is to lighten the load of repentance by repenting for something you’ve already taken care of. It’s somewhat like repenting for someone else’s sins; it can make you feel good, but it doesn’t have any real effect.

How does someone fall into this error?

- One way is simply to deny that the problem exists. “I haven’t changed.” You mean you were perfect the last time you took communion, and you haven’t done anything since? That’s not self-examination, that’s denial.
- More commonly you just don’t think about it. As CS Lewis put it, your objective is to “let sleeping worms lie.”
- A bit more hypocritical, but most commonly practiced, is that you are simply content with the kind of sinner you are. The problem with this attitude is that while you are content, God is not.

So it is that you are told to examine yourself every time you come to communion. Communion includes communion with God; to see God you must be pure in

heart. He wants you to examine yourself and have that lead to your repentance, sincere and honest. We would do well to remember us King Solomon's admonition:

When you vow a vow to God, do not delay paying it, for he has no pleasure in fools. Pay what you vow.
(Ecclesiastes 5:4 ESV)

So examine yourself honestly this morning, and let this be the basis of your true repentance. Then remember that your forgiveness came about because of his body on the Cross, represented here by the bread. It came about because of his blood shed for you, represented here by the cup. Be honest in your self-examination; be pure in heart and take the Lord's Supper in spirit and in truth.

APRIL 2

Perhaps it does not seem important, but there have been many church fights over the question of just exactly who can be served communion. Many churches today practice what is called “open communion” in which practically anyone who claims to be a Christian will be allowed to participate. Other Christian groups restrict who was allowed, either by church law or custom.

An example of this is found in the church in Richmond, Virginia in 1866. One rule was observed: Communion could not be given to a solitary person -- at least two must be at the rail. This was to preserve the spirit of Matthew 18:20.

From the back of the sanctuary, a former slave stood up and strode forward. The minister was taken aback. This was a “white” church; racial separation was the firm belief of virtually all the members. This was also the Lord’s Supper. The minister hesitated. The man was at the rail alone; the minister was not obliged to serve Communion to a solitary worshiper. What was he to do? .

Another worshiper rose from his seat. He walked down the aisle and without a word knelt by the first man to take Communion. His example decided the minister’s action; Communion was served to both men together. A courageous example from a courageous man: Robert E. Lee.

Why such a fuss over communion? The answer is found in Christ’s statement that his blood is the new covenant. His sacrifice defined the new relationship with God the Father. You are either in such a relationship or not; you either are a Christian or you are not. That’s why it’s important; it’s the common signal that tells the world and the church you are a Christian.

Communion is a sign of the unity of the church. That does not mean we are all interchangeable parts; the concept of being a “member” still applies. But there are certain things we do hold in common that show up at communion.

- It's a reminder that we are all sinners, in need of a Savior.
- It is a reminder of the atonement of Christ, his sacrifice. It is thus also a reminder of the price he paid for our forgiveness.
- It is a reminder of his walking out of the grave — the resurrection of which he is the firstfruits, with his church to follow.
- It is reminder that Christ is the root of our faith.

Taking communion is not a privilege guaranteed by having your name on the roster. To take it honestly, you must be a genuine member — a working part — of Christ's church. We are united in seeing his body in the bread; we are united in seeing his blood in the cup. As the old hymn put it, "the Church's one foundation is Jesus Christ her Lord."

APRIL 9

You will of course recall the story. That classic of children's literature, *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*, is a familiar one to parents. Remember that Goldilocks went rushing into the bears' house and began her career of breaking, entering and theft by consuming some porridge. But not just any porridge would do; one bowl was too hot, the other too cold but the third bowl was "just right." She gives us an example here of porridge meeting requirements: it needs to be exactly just right. If something is going to be "just right", it must meet the exact requirements. That means you know what the requirements are.

Communion may be examined this way. If we understand the purpose and "rightness" of communion, we can see that it is "just right." Communion tells us the most important things about Christianity and Christ.

- It reminds us of the atonement.
- It repeats our understanding of His suffering.
- It emphasizes His love for us.

In short, it does the "right things."

It does them in the "right way" – simple, using commonplace elements. This way we may be sure that all Christians can afford to take communion.

It produces the "right result" – a pure heart, repentant and able to see God.

Remember David's phrasing: "create in me a new heart, O God."

Right things, right way, ... right results. Even Goldilocks would understand!

Prostitute

APRIL 16

Luke 7:36-50

Simon, the Pharisee in the story, is a respectable man. He has invited the upcoming young rabbi, Jesus, to lunch. Without really thinking about it, he thinks Jesus shares his opinions in various matters.

- Jesus should certainly be able to see that the lady is a prostitute, both by her dress and by the fact that she lets her hair down in public (a social taboo of the time.)
- From that expensive alabaster vase Jesus could easily tell this is not a prostitute who does it out of desperation. Her motive is not feeding her baby girl, but the good things money can buy.
- Simon also expects the Jesus will condemn the sin of prostitution, which he does.

So far, Jesus seems to be quite the respectable person himself. And surely a respectable person would condemn not only the sin, but the blatant sinner, right?

Notice the distinction: prostitution is not respectable but the prostitute is accepted, indeed forgiven. The question is not one of law and morality but one of love — and God loves the repentant sinner.

Communion is a reminder of that. It is a reminder of God's great love for the world, including the repentant sinners. It reminds us of the price that Christ paid for the atonement of our sins. He bled and died that we might be forgiven, taken into his own church and kept as one of his dear sons and daughters. We are reminded that God loves the repentant sinner — and that includes everyone in this room.

So as you partake of communion this morning, remember these things:

- See in the elements, the bread and the cup, the physical sacrifice made by our Lord that we might be forgiven.
- Examine yourself and see if you are in need of repentance. He commands this so that you will do it regularly.
- Then depart from this place knowing that God loves you. You are his child, welcome in his home. Yes, even you.

APRIL 23

The dog's name is Ruth. She barks almost all the time.

It is not surprising, really. Ruth is a "rescue" dog. She was retrieved from the pound by a young couple who wanted a dog. She is now undergoing the transition from a dog in the pound to a dog in the family. It's not surprising this takes a little while. What is it that Ruth really wants?

- She wants to belong to her own pack, in this case a pack full of humans. But she wants to feel like she's part of the group.
- More than that, she wants to feel that she has a position in that group — a standing, a role that she plays that is hers alone.
- Most of all, she wants to be loved. That scratch under the chin or behind the ears means a great deal to her.

Isn't that the case with most human beings too? Particularly when our ego is been damaged, or someone is let us down — or we've done something really stupid — we want those same things. We want to know that we belong somewhere and are not just isolated human beings bouncing around the streets.

More than that, we don't want to just belong — we want to fit in. We like the idea that we have a place in the group and they need us as we need them.

Finally, like all human beings, we need to know that we are loved. Human beings were designed to be loved and they feel it acutely when they are not.

Communion shows us how Christ answers these needs. You and I belong to one of the greatest organizations ever created: the church. Those who take Christ as Lord and Savior are automatically part of this organization. And, in case you hadn't noticed, the church takes particular care to make sure the newcomers are welcome. As you grow in the church you will find that the Holy Spirit is the place

for you to serve. It's yours, and it helps define you in the group known as the church. That may be something as simple as teaching four-year-olds or something that is viewed as more difficult, like missionary work. But it is your task; a place to serve.

All this of course is rooted in the love of Christ. There is no greater love than to lay down your life for a friend, and Christ laid down his life for us that we might know salvation. So as you partake this morning, remember that the cup, his blood, and the bread, his body, are the signs of his great love for you for all of us. Take it; take it seriously; take it with the church that loves you.

APRIL 30

Easton's Bible Dictionary, in an article on the purposes of communion, tells us that communion is a badge of the Christian.

A badge of the Christian. A badge can signify many things, but we may focus on these three aspects:

- **Membership.** A badge is frequently used to signify that a person is a member of a particular organization.
- **Access.** Badges are used to control the access of individuals to certain areas or information. Those who worked in the defense industry will be familiar with this as a way of controlling who gets into what area.
- **Authority.** The most common example of badges' authorities is that of a policeman or other law enforcement officer. The distinctive badge tells you that they have the authority to arrest people, for example.

These three aspects applying Christianity as well. Communion tells the world that you are a member of the church, that you believe what the faith teaches. It proclaims that you want to be an authentic Christian, one who practices what he preaches. It tells the world that you have a lifestyle of a working, practicing Christian.

More than that, you have access. You have the right to intercede for anyone by going to the Lord of the universe in the sovereign prayer. You are a child of God who can stand before the throne of grace, making your requests known without fear. More than that, you have the privilege of forgiving those who offended you — and making that forgiveness stick. At the same throne of grace you can bring your repentance and ask for your own forgiveness. You are not alone in this; the Holy Spirit is the lead and guide you. Yours is a structured intercession.

You may think you have no authority, but you have more than enough. For example, if you forgive someone else, the Lord counts that forgiveness for that person. You have the authority to spread the gospel — one-on-one or in a large gathering. Perhaps most important of all, when Christ returns if you have suffered with him, you will reign with him.

So, as you partake this morning, do so in an open honesty. Don't just go through the motions; really mean it. In particular about your repentance. By taking communion you are wearing the bear to the Christian. Be the honest person behind the badge. It is his body and his blood, given for your sins, that you take. Live like the triumphant child of God you are.

MAY 7

The use of the word "Lord" has a certain ambiguity for Christians. On the one hand, we frequently refer to Jesus as our Lord Jesus Christ. Frequent use of this phrase lets it roll off the tongue without really thinking about what it means. But the other use of the word "Lord" is in a sentence something like "Lord it over someone..." Most of us have worked for a manager/boss who fit that description nicely. There is a difference between a tyrant and a prince. It's worth comparing the Lordship of Christ to the Lordship of the world.

First, let's consider what Jesus does NOT do as our Lord.

- Christ never shows arrogance towards us, or contempt. There is no sense that he's trying to humiliate us to motivate us.
- There is no sense that Christ is comparing one of us to another to motivate better performance. He judges each of us individually; it's not a competition.
- Most important of all, Christ does not threaten. In fact, he removes the great threat of Hell from us. He doesn't break down the door; he stands outside and knocks.

What DOES Christ do?

- When we offend him, he forgives us. The great and the mighty have the privilege of being gracious to the poor and the weak.
- How does he treat your faults? Is it not with gentleness and patient correction?
- Perhaps most important of all, he takes the blame for our sins.

We see this in communion each time we have it. In the cup we see his blood; in the bread, his body, sacrificed for us. It is love in its highest form. By this method he has atoned for our sins; he paid the price. We do this until he

returns again. At that time the great judgment will occur, and he will stand up for us, telling the Father that we belong to him — we are the redeemed. This is what our Lord will do for us. None of us want a tyrant; all of us love a Prince. As you partake, remember the price he paid to become the Lord of your life.

MAY 14

Most evangelical Christians have never heard of Ignatius of Antioch. He lived in the late first and early second centuries (dates uncertain). A martyr for the faith as well as the Bishop of Antioch, he is perhaps best known for his argument with the Docetists.

The Docetists — and there were many varieties of these people, with varying belief schemes — all agreed that Jesus did not have a physical body. He was some sort of spirit who *appeared* to have a physical body. This belief system is rooted in Greek philosophy of the time, and seems strange to Christians today.

Ignatius countered this idea with an argument structured around Communion.

- He argued that the elements in communion are physically real, an undoubted fact. We do not take imaginary communion.
- He then argued that Christ himself told us that these elements are his body (see Matthew 26:26-28). If the elements which make up Christ's body are real, Ignatius reasoned, then Christ's body must be real.

We too may gain by examining the fact that the elements of communion are real. For if they are real, the suffering they represent is also real. Christ really was nailed to that cross; he bled and died, suffering for our sins. In this way He demonstrated his real love for us. As you partake this morning, consider the ultimate reality of communion: God in the flesh, Jesus of Nazareth, bled and died for your sins out of his great love for us.

MAY 21

"Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.
(Matthew 5:7 NASB)

Have you ever considered how much easier it is to learn from an example than it is to learn from a book? Let's face it; some of us are just not cut out for book learning. Before the printing press this was not a problem. Even today, though, there are advantages to learning from an example. You don't have to study; you just have to keep your eyes open. If you do, you will see not only the example doing what's right, but also the world's reaction. You get to see how other people treat the example. That's why Christ, in the Sermon on the Mount, gave us that little verse. Combined with his example it lets us see the connection between words and action.

Christ is our example of mercy. We may note certain characteristics of this:

- His example of mercy is greater than anything we could ever accomplish; the sacrifice on the Cross. We can imitate but we cannot equal such a merciful gift.
- It is often called "grace" — the word in the original Greek means "gift", for it was freely given. It is a characteristic of mercy that it is not purchased at the cash register.
- As He was rewarded by his heavenly Father, so too are the merciful here on earth rewarded — with mercy.

Communion is a regular reminder of the mercy of God. We see in the elements, the bread and the cup, a reminder of the sacrifice he made. He gave up his body and blood so that we might be the recipients of God's mercy. That alone would make it worth remembering. We might also note that we take this communion frequently, as if to teach us that we should offer mercy to others just as

consistently. Perhaps most important of all, the character of mercy shown in communion reminds us that it must be given, not bargained for. As you partake this morning, search your mind see if there is someone to whom you should be showing mercy. Perhaps it is simply the grace of forgiveness that is needed. Then do so quickly, and without thought to cost or pain. Blessed are the merciful.

MAY 28

Mercy, by its very nature, is a gift. You cannot deserve mercy; for mercy is what you get when you don't deserve it. Indeed, Christians memorize the phrase, "saved by grace." The word grace in the original means "a gift."

In the Scriptures there are two places that are translated with the word "cheerful" or "cheerfulness." One of them is the instruction that the Lord "loves a cheerful giver" (2nd Corinthians 9:7). The other is in Romans 12:8 where we are advised that he who gives mercy is to do so with cheerfulness. The connection between the two is in the root word for each; it went from Greek to English and became our word, "hilarious." It apparently seems that God likes the giver who laughs with joy at the act of giving, especially in giving mercy. It is a point of divine style; God is not a resident thundercloud on your shoulder scowling at all you do. Rather, he is one who enjoys giving.

We can see this in the church. God's greatest gift to us was his Son (John 3:16). There are two occasions when we acknowledge this.

- We celebrate the incarnation of Christ; it's called Christmas. As the song says, "it's the most wonderful time of the year." Note the verb; celebrate.
- And how do we say that we are having communion this Sunday? Do we not use that same verb and say, "we are celebrating Communion today"?

The great gift of God, his grace, is received with celebration.

So today, as we celebrate communion, recognize in your mind that God did not give this grace to us grudgingly, but with an giving, cheerful heart. His mercy was not poured out upon you with a sour look but with a laughing smile. Reflect upon this as you partake. It may be this week that you will have the chance to show mercy to someone. If so, will remember what your Lord is taught you about style — do so with cheerfulness; perhaps, even, hilariously.

JUNE 4

Have you ever been in a situation where you owed somebody a really big favor? Sometimes it can feel embarrassing if you don't have a way to repay such a favor, or at least you don't have it right with you. What would you do when a person in position of power pulls a string on your behalf?

- At the very least, of course, you say "thank you." Your mother raised you to be polite, this is the polite thing to do. But in general it doesn't cover the social debt for something major.
- Of course, you not only need to say "thank you" but you have to demonstrate it in a positive action. What that action might be depends on the circumstances, but you should remain alert for the opportunity.

Now, if that's how you would treat a favor given to you by a good friend, how should you react to God in light of all the benefits he's given you? David put the question this way:

What shall I render to the LORD For all His benefits toward me?
(Psalms 116:12 NASB)

He then gives us the answer.

I shall lift up the cup of salvation And call upon the name of the LORD. I shall pay my vows to the LORD, Oh may it be in the presence of all His people.
(Psalms 116:13-14 NASB)

We shall take them in reverse order.

- Pay your vows. Have you ever promised the Lord that you would do something — or give up something — and later just quietly forgot about it? Did you think God has forgotten about it too? Perhaps it's time to revisit your promise to God.

- Call upon his name. Many of us are quite good at calling on the name of God — after we have called on every other possible resource. That's the wrong way around. Go to God in prayer and ask him for what you need; rely upon his promises. Your attitude counts.
- Then, lift the cup of salvation. The phrase occurs in the Bible only in verse 13. Is it prophetic of communion? C. H. Spurgeon thought so. We may take it as such. The cup of salvation you lift is the cup of communion. When you partake, you proclaim yourself to be a disciple of Christ.

So, then, examine yourself. Have you made a promise to God you haven't kept? Are you relying on everyone else but God, or do you put him first in your list? Real Christian faith counts on God to deliver. Then, having sorted things out with God, partake of the cup this morning in remembrance of your Lord's blood. His blood is the way of forgiveness, the cup of salvation. In communion you proclaim yourself to be a faithful Christian. Let your actions match your words.

JUNE 11

"In truth I know that this is so; But how can a man be in the right before God?
(Job 9:2 NASB)

Have you ever been in the situation where you felt you just needed to talk to the man in charge and plead your case? Maybe you wouldn't win, but at least you'd be heard. But usually the man in charge is so high up the ladder your chances are no good at all. Now you know how Job felt. He has the added difficulty that the man in charge — God Almighty — has certain requirements for admission into his courtroom. In particular, you must be "righteous." That's a big requirement when you're talking about the creator of the universe, as Job goes on to demonstrate the rest of this chapter. So how do we do this?

The solutions proposed are many and various, but mankind has brought forth two that typically come up in every religion.

- First, there is some method of offering the sacrifice to sooth the God of the universe. In Job's case that one doesn't apply here, but we use it a lot.
- The other method is to become one of the righteous people in our own eyes. We join the "good guy" club. Good guys have to follow stricter rules, and we are very inventive about those rules.

It comes down to the Pharisee and the tax collector. We can either admit that we are sinners (which disqualifies us) or say that were better than somebody else. This may in fact be true; it isn't righteousness. At best it puts us at the top of the miserable sinners list.

Communion demonstrates God's solution to the problem. Only he can provide the perfect sacrifice of atonement; only Christ is "good enough." That's the first

step. The next step is you accepting his offer. You have to acknowledge that you are a sinner in need of a Savior and welcome his grace into your life.

After that, you are to regularly remember that sacrifice – in communion. We remember that the bread represents Christ's body, torn for us. We remember that the cup represents his blood, shed for us. So it is that we remember God's way of having us stand before him, righteous at His expense. Remember what he has done for you, and partake in a worthy manner.

JUNE 18

Is not the cup of blessing which we bless a sharing in the blood of Christ? Is not the bread which we break a sharing in the body of Christ? Since there is one bread, we who are many are one body; for we all partake of the one bread.
(1 Corinthians 10:16-17 NASB)

Paul (and his readers) had no concept of bacteria, or hygiene as we know it. When the Lord's Supper was celebrated, a common communion cup was used. Every person in the church drank from the same cup of wine. Each of them could see his own participation in the common cup; the only leap of faith required was to see it as Christ's blood. Similarly, one loaf of bread was used, being parceled out to the whole congregation. Again, it was relatively easy to see the body of Christ in this.

So you can imagine the fuss that would be made if someone who was not a Christian participated in the same cup and loaf. It would be a sacrilege, because the non-believer was not part of the body of Christ (that is, the church). How much greater, then, would be the sense of horror if a Christian went out and participated in a similar feast at an idol's temple!

We may extract something from this. The cup and the loaf we use each Sunday is more than a memorial to the sacrifice of Christ. They are elements which bind the church together. Each such memorial is a "participation" (as Paul has it here) in Christ. In a deep, symbolic sense, we eat the same meal and therefore we become the same body—the body of Christ, the church.

So then, when you take the communion offered each Sunday, should you not know the horror of taking this participation lightly? We are specifically warned about it. It is because this ceremonial meal is the one that binds us together that we must take it with all seriousness, confession and repentance. Do not take lightly that which was bought at the Cross by the body and blood of Christ.

(Largely borrowed from one of the devotionals)

SEPTEMBER 17

It was his first day on his new assignment, in San Francisco. Between the subway station and his office there was one street corner. On that corner, as often happens in San Francisco, there was a beggar. Just looking at the beggar he could tell that the man was blind; his cardboard sign said that he was a Marine who had fought at Da Nang; now he was begging for money for food. Our businessman averted his eyes and hurried on into the office.

That night, in his hotel room, our businessman went to prayer. He must've felt guilty about the beggar because he offered his excuse to God. He ended his plea with, "after all, I can't solve world hunger." The Almighty replied, in an angry voice, "I didn't ask you to solve world hunger. I asked you to feed one of my Marines."

All the ways of a man are clean in his own sight, But the LORD weighs the motives.

(Proverbs 16:2 NASB)

How often we think that our excuses cause our sins of omission to be pardoned automatically! We imagine that because we have some rationale for failing to do what we know we should do but God smiles and tells us that he understands. It is a common failing of sinners — and each of us is a sinner.

We are taught to examine ourselves at communion. As you prepare to take of the body and blood of Christ, look into your heart. Know that God already looks into it and sees everything. If there is something you know you should be doing, bring it before God and ask his forgiveness. Abandon your excuses and do what is right. Make the commitment to do that before you take communion.

Then, with clean hands, take the bread which represents the body of Christ. Take the cup that represents his blood. Remember this sacrifice that makes it possible for God to forgive you — and count you among those who feed his Marines.

SEPTEMBER 24

It seems odd to some people that the symbol of Christianity is a cross. Crucifixion is a painful and humiliating way to die, yet millions of Christians proudly display it as the sign of their belief. Why this symbol? It is for the death of Christ that we wear it. Why is Christ's death so important?

ATONEMENT

God is righteous and just; it is one of his attributes and he cannot be untrue to himself. Righteousness demands atonement for sin, a lesson planted firmly in the Jews. But if all righteousness - pure righteousness - is to be fulfilled, then the sacrifice of atonement must be pure also. The standard of righteousness is God's standard, not ours. Only the sinless man *could* be the atonement we need for righteousness.

RECONCILIATION

God is righteous, but God is also love. His objective is not just to atone for us (and then let us be) but rather reconcile us to himself. He is not interested in burying the hatchet - he wants to eliminate the hatchet entirely. So atonement is necessary - but not sufficient. Reconciliation is required. Atonement requires that the price be paid; reconciliation that it be paid willingly.

There is no greater love than this: that a man die for his friends. Christ's sacrifice was not a spur of the moment thing. It was planned. Crucifixion is not only a painful death but a shameful one. It marked you as outside the law. Worse yet, this crucifixion was accompanied by abandonment and betrayal. That is the measure of God's love for us - a love which stretches beyond atonement to reconciliation.

EXAMPLE

Christ frequently tells us to "take up your cross and follow me." If nothing else, the cross is our great example. If we claim to be his disciples; then what is there that we should not be willing to do?

The crucifixion — the sacrifice of Christ's body and blood — is what we are to remember today in communion. In the bread we should see his body hanging on the cross; in the cup, his blood. As you partake, remember. Remember that he died for you, atoning for your sins. Remember that he reconciled you to God Almighty, so that you are now a child of God. Remember that he is sent you the example of sacrifice. Think on these things as you partake.

OCTOBER 1

The most common accusation made against Jesus of Nazareth was simply this: he partied hearty with all the wrong kind of people, particularly prostitutes and tax collectors. Jesus, in his defense, replied with these parables.

Now all the tax collectors and the sinners were coming near Him to listen to Him. Both the Pharisees and the scribes began to grumble, saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them." So He told them this parable, saying, "What man among you, if he has a hundred sheep and has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open pasture and go after the one which is lost until he finds it? "When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. "And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep which was lost!' "I tell you that in the same way, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance. "Or what woman, if she has ten silver coins and loses one coin, does not light a lamp and sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it? "When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin which I had lost!' "In the same way, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

(Luke 15:1-10 NASB)

May I point out something often omitted in looking at these parables? The lost sheep, when returned to the fold, becomes just as valuable as the other sheep. It is not discounted because it had been lost. Similarly, your lost silver dollar doesn't magically become a quarter when you find it. In both instances they are valued like all the others.

We see this in communion. There are no second-class Christians taking communion this morning; all of us are equal at the foot of the cross. We are clearly told that his body and his blood are for "whosoever will." So as you partake this morning, pass judgment on no one except yourself. Judgment belongs to the Lord; repentance is ours. Examine yourself carefully, repent where needed and then partake in the body and blood of Jesus Christ.

OCTOBER 8

World War II was noted for stirring speeches. One of the shortest was that of Douglas MacArthur to the people of the Philippines: "I shall return." Later in the war the Navy admirals wanted to bypass the Philippines. MacArthur pointed out that this would be regarded by the Filipino people as a betrayal of their consistent loyalty to America. The argument persuaded Franklin Roosevelt.

Communion is a reminder of the sacrifice of Christ on the cross. We should also note that it will endure until he returns. There are great many theories as to what will happen, in what sequence, and how often when Christ returns. But almost all theories agree on these points:

- Christ will return in bodily form in the clouds. That is the same way he left at the Ascension.
- Christians who have died will rise from the grave to meet their Lord. Those who are walking the earth will then meet him too.
- Christ will judge the living and the dead at his return. He will reward those who have done well and punish those who have not.
- Eventually, Christ will create a new heaven and new Earth in which the Christians will live, presumably eternally.

(I know it's likely that your view includes a great deal more than this. But this is supposed to be a *short* communion meditation.)

So we are to take communion as a reminder of these things as well. As such, we are to look at ourselves and ask, am I prepared for these things? If Gabriel blew his trumpet right now would you be embarrassed or thrilled? These things are going to happen; "the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it." Examine yourself, therefore, and see if you need to remedy some sinful habit in your life. Don't wait

until your next opportunity for communion comes; the timing of Christ's return is not known. This may be your last reminder. He shall return!

OCTOBER 15

Paul, a servant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ for the faith of God's elect and the knowledge of the truth that leads to godliness--a faith and knowledge resting on the hope of eternal life, which God, who does not lie, promised before the beginning of time,
(Titus 1:1-2 NIV)

Paul, in his preface to his letter to young Titus, highlights a problem common to most intellectual Christians. More than once such a Christian hears something like, "we don't want any intellectual Christians in our church. We want Christians of faith." The idea is that faith and knowledge are contradictory. Paul implicitly assumes that they are not; they are complementary. This is why we are commanded to have a ready defense of the faith; we need both faith and knowledge.

Faith looks forward to what is to come. It seems a mighty leap of faith to believe that we will be raised from the dead. To someone with no experience with Christianity this would seem absolutely absurd. Yet Christians by the billions believe it. As Paul says here, it is our hope. In the original Greek, the word used for hope means "utmost confidence." We depend upon this hope, and we defend it.

With what knowledge do we defend it? There are two hinted at here.

- One is the character of God. Aquinas taught us that God *is* his attributes. We say that God is love, not just that he is loving. God is also truth. If you tell me that an animal is a bear, I know it's not a aardvark. If God is truth, he cannot lie. And he has promised the resurrection since the beginning of the ages.

- The other is the resurrection of Christ. Sin must be atoned for; and ours was atoned for at the Cross. This was the necessary predecessor of the resurrection of Christ. He rose from the dead; therefore God can raise us from the dead. This is exactly what he promised.

Communion celebrates the death and burial of Christ, the atonement. We are told to do this until He returns. The bread that we take symbolizes his body, on the cross for us. The cup symbolizes his blood, shed for us in accordance with the ancient law that tells us there is no remission of sins without blood. We will do this until he returns to judge the living and the dead. Therefore, prepare yourself to receive his body and his blood in a worthy manner. We are all sinners; we should all be repentant sinners. Then accept his grace and forgiveness with glad hearts.

OCTOBER 22

Imagine, if you will, that you are in a motion picture theater in 1937. It's during the Great Depression; you are seeking relief in that imaginary world of suspended disbelief that is the motion picture. The theater darkens; splashed on the screen is the title of the movie: "*Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*." One particularly fascinating scene concerns the wicked stepmother and Queen. She goes to her magic mirror and asks the fateful question,

"Mirror, mirror on the wall

Who's the fairest of them all?"

She's expecting the usual answer; she is. But today — a rare event for the demon of the mirror — she gets an honest answer: Snow White. Flattery gives place to jealous rage.

At communion, the Christian has an analog to the magic mirror: self-examination. Who knows what is deep in your heart, except yourself? But beware; self-examination can be a little demon who lies to you. Interestingly, the Greek word used to proclaim this in the New Testament means a test which expects a good answer. It's like going to the doctor for an annual checkup; you don't expect anything to be wrong but it's best to make sure. So make sure your magic mirror is telling you the truth.

Also, make sure your little demon is not trying to distract you. You are to examine yourself, not those around you.

Why do we do this? We've heard one reason; it's like the medical exam. You don't expect trouble, but it's best to make sure.

An important reason is this: in communion, you meet Christ. Your hands partake of his body and his blood, the bread and the cup. It's a meal with Christ; wash your hands first.

Seek his forgiveness. As the Scriptures tell us,

If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

(1 John 1:9 NASB)

To test, expecting a good result. His forgiveness is a very good result. Mirror mirror on the wall, who's the Savior of us all!

OCTOBER 29

In the 26th chapter of the Book of Acts Paul presents his defense to King Agrippa concerning the charges brought against him. He gets right to the point, dismissing the charges of riot and insurrection. He draws their attention to the main problem: he believes in the resurrection of the dead. For this believe he brings forward three arguments.

- First, in a general sort of way, he cites the Old Testament prophecies. Agrippa is a scholar of the Old Testament and knows these things. Paul just reminds him.
- Next, he cites his personal experience on the road to Damascus.
- Finally, he makes the argument that to say the dead cannot be raised is to deny the power of Almighty God.

Christians since the very beginning of the church have always believed in the resurrection of the dead at the Lord's return. We believe Christ will return as he prophesied (as well as the Old Testament.) From the oldest book in the Bible (Job) to the newest (Revelation) the Bible proclaims this doctrine. By taking communion you state symbolically that you believe it too.

Communion commemorates the death and burial of Christ. Doing so implicitly proclaims the resurrection of Christ as well. Christianity makes no sense without the resurrection. In communion we take the bread as a symbol of his body in the cup is a symbol of his blood, signifying that we believe in the atonement sacrifice that he made on the cross. If you believe in his resurrection, it also acknowledges his coming again and the general resurrection of the dead. As Paul put it to Agrippa,

"And now I am standing trial for the hope of the promise made by God to our fathers;
(Acts 26:6 NASB)

“The hope of the promise.” We tell the world, in communion, that we share the hope of the promise of the resurrection when he returns.

NOVEMBER 5

She is 80 years old, but to the sailors who work to preserve her and show her to the public she is still beautiful. At 57,000 tons she is one of the largest ships afloat. She is thoroughly obsolete, retired from the Navy but still visited by thousands. She is the USS Iowa, in San Pedro, California. Known as the “big stick” during her days of service in World War II, she is now a museum ship.

Why do people visit such a relic from World War II? For some, is just the novelty of it all; they’ve never seen a battleship before. But for others there is great meaning in walking on board the old ship.

- For some, it is the moment of passion they remember; a defining experience for their lives. They remember the days when they were young sailors. The experiences vary, but they remember those which formed their character in their early days.
- Often it is to complete a memory. Your grandfather told you about being on board a ship as a sailor. He’s gone now, but you can see the ship and imagine living on board. Living, fighting, even dying on board.
- It may be a chance to remember a commitment you made to your fellow sailors long ago. Perhaps it was simply, “I will not forget you.” You remember those who have gone before, perhaps with tears.

Communion carries such memories as well. Is it time to focus our memories on what Christ has done for us; but we cannot help being affected by our own memories.

- It may bring back memories of the night that you took the Lord as your Savior. Perhaps it was the day of your baptism. Maybe it was the day you wandered into that church, wondering why. The important thing is that you remember what Christ did for you.

- Perhaps your mind wanders back to the time of the apostles, bringing up something that triggers a reminder to you of changes you need to make. A resolution for repentance that still hangs in your mind. Resolve this with your Lord today.
- It might even be a commitment you made to someone long ago. Did your grandfather tell you to meet him at the gates of heaven? Remember your promises, for the Lord will hold you to them.

Whatever the memory, merge it with the memory of Christ on the cross, and his passion. We do not need to be instructed nearly as much as we need to be reminded. As you partake of the bread and the cup, remember these things.

NOVEMBER 12

In the year of our Lord eighteen hundred and forty-four, in the town of Newville, Ohio, many of the townspeople are walking around wearing white robes — ascension robes, to be specific. It seems that one William Miller had written a book telling the world this particular date would be the day the Lord returns, and the townsfolk want to look their best for entry into heaven. This presented a slightly silly look to those who weren't believers in Miller's theory. It was not the first time somebody had flubbed the date of our Lord's return, nor the last. To the nonbeliever in this theory, it must've looked rather silly.

It's the same way today. Radio and television preachers are fond of telling you their predictions about Revelation. The usual reaction divides the congregation into two groups. There are those who are absolutely certain this — and no other — theory is prevailing. Then there are those who are just bewildered by the whole thing. But there is help in the Scriptures! We find this in the Old Testament:

"The anger of the LORD will not turn back Until He has performed and carried out the purposes of His heart; **In the last days you will clearly understand it.**
(Jeremiah 23:20 NASB)

The important question is not the exact date on which the Lord will return. The important question is, "what do I do until he returns?" May I suggest three general things that must be done.

- *Fight the good fight.* Do justice when iniquity comes your way, with the tools that you are given.
- *Do the good work.* Make disciples out of those around you. When they come to Christ, teach them what he needs them taught. Do this with all the love you can muster.
- *Keep yourself pure.* Make sure you are ready to meet your God — or be an example to others — at all times.

As you approach communion today you should focus on keeping yourself pure. May I suggest three steps?

- Begin by acknowledging Christ as your Lord as well as your Savior. Both points are essential; communion at least proclaims your salvation.
- Enter into a time of self-examination. If you see an area in which you need repentance, settle it quickly with your Lord.
- Then, partake.

As you partake, remember that the bread symbolizes his body broken for you; the cup, his blood. You do this to remember his sacrifice. You do this to acknowledge the atonement in your salvation. You also acknowledge that he is faithful and just to forgive those who repent. Don't worry about the date of his return; it will be clear to us later.

NOVEMBER 19

How blessed is the man whose strength is in You, In whose heart are the highways to Zion! Passing through the valley of Baca they make it a spring; The early rain also covers it with blessings. They go from strength to strength, Every one of them appears before God in Zion.

(Psalms 84:5-7 NASB)

In this short selection from Psalm 84 we see three of the main characteristics of the strong Christian.

- The strong Christian is not strong in the ways of the world, but in the ways of the Lord. How do you do this? The answer is relatively simple; you set your sights on heaven, not on earthly success. As CS Lewis once remarked, if you aim for heaven you get it — and the earth thrown in also.
- The path of the strong Christian goes through suffering. The phrase, “valley of Baca” means the valley of weeping. The secret to handling this is you turn suffering into blessings. You may not realize this but you do this frequently. When you go to a party and tell all stories about you and your family, are they about the good times or the suffering times?
- The strong Christian goes from “strength to strength.” It’s as if you were being prepared for something and are in training. Perhaps the Almighty is readying you for something. We can see but little of the way into the future; He sees it all.

The great example of this is Christ himself. We may look at how he did it.

- His sights were set on heaven; “I have come to do your will” he says of the Father.

- Valley of Tears? Consider the night he spent in Gethsemane before the crucifixion.
- Strength to Strength? He was made perfect through suffering, as the author of Hebrews tells us (Hebrews 5:9).

As you partake of communion today, it should be reminder of his suffering. The bread should bring to your mind his body on the cross — held there by the nails in his hands and feet. In the cup you should see his blood, pouring from his body like great drops of sweat (Luke 22:44).

Strength to Strength? Consider how he went from the crucifixion to the resurrection, from endurance to triumph. Think on these things, and partake in a worthy manner.

NOVEMBER 26

Suppose, for the moment, that you are a chemist. Sitting in your lab doing what chemists do, a friend comes and announces to you that he has been trained to be a professional juggler. Reaching onto the shelves, he picks up three jars of yellow liquid, and utters the two most dangerous words in the English language: “watch this.” Just before he tosses the first jar up into the air, you manage to croak one word: “nitroglycerin.” It’s amazing how fast an attitude can change, isn’t it?

Juggling nitroglycerin should be done with a sense of awe and a great deal of caution. So how does one approach a task with awe?

- Recognize the danger. Just because you’re foolhardy enough to try it doesn’t mean it won’t explode.
- Respect the rules. If a task is awesome, there will be rules.
- Know what you’re doing. And if you don’t, don’t do it. Read the manual, for example.
- Don’t start without instruction.

The spiritual equivalent of “awe” is the word “sacred.” If something is sacred, we should have a sense of awe concerning it. Surprisingly, many people treat communion as if it is not sacred — but it is.

- It was given to us by Christ by way of example.
- It is commanded to us by the apostles, and we know (Acts 1:2) that the apostles were inspired by the Holy Spirit.

The rules concerning communion vary by denomination, particularly if you believe in transubstantiation. But that is a topic of very great length for which we have no time this morning.

Why do I compare it with juggling nitroglycerin? Hear the words of the apostle Paul:

For he who eats and drinks, eats and drinks judgment to himself if he does not judge the body rightly. For this reason many among you are weak and sick, and a number sleep.

(1 Corinthians 11:29-30 NASB)

So what are the instructions?

- We are to take communion together. It's not a drive-through window.
- When we do, we proclaim the death of our Lord. This, by implication, also proclaims that resurrection and the atonement.
- This is to be preceded by our examining ourselves, so that we might repent, receive forgiveness and partake in a worthy manner.

You are invited to the Lord's table, a sacred place, a sacred event. Conduct yourself accordingly.

DECEMBER 3

"Truly I say to you, wherever this gospel is preached in the whole world, what this woman has done will also be spoken of in memory of her."
(Matthew 26:13 NASB)

When you hear the word "souvenir", you normally think of some little trinket that you purchase to remind yourself of someplace you have been. It is a memorial to a trip that was pleasant. But souvenirs don't always have to be small and portable. Take, for instance, any of the eight battleships the United States is preserved as memorials to those who served in World War II. The smallest of them is 35,000 tons of steel. This will probably not fit on your shelves. But why do we preserve such large souvenirs?

- The usual ostensible purpose in this instance is to memorialize those who served in World War II. This is a group that is getting smaller by the day.
- Many visit this souvenir ship as a way of recalling their time serving in the U.S. Navy, battleship or not.
- Still others go to remember not what they did in the war, but what their grandfather did.

Whatever the reason, it is one colossal souvenir.

Memorials seem to come in one of two flavors. Either they are some physical object, large or small, or they are some formal ceremony. The physical objects range from small to large; the ceremonies from simple to elaborate.

Humans are designed to be eternal; therefore they need memorials. Curiously enough, in the New Testament there are only two memorials described. One of these is communion, of course. The other is found in Matthew chapter 26, the incident where a woman poured perfume on Jesus' head. (There is much debate as to whether or not this is the Mary of Mary and Martha. For our purposes, it does not matter.) It is surprising, given the place and time, as women were

considered second-class citizens. We may observe these characteristics of her actions.

- *A Beautiful Thing* – there is a sense in which this act of devotion just “fits” – it has that sense of being the right extravagance at the right time.
- *Timely* – the act is just before Jesus’ death. We can see in it that she has done this at precisely the right time
- *It is all inclusive* – she had nothing else so precious, one would think, and so the act was everything she could do.
- *Insightful* – her devotion matched his thought; he was going to the Cross; she was anointing him for burial.

Communion has these characteristics too. It is in fact a beautiful ceremony, of utter and elegant simplicity. It is almost impossible to clutter it with artistic renditions that obscure the native beauty of the ceremony.

It is also timely. It is done on a regular basis so that we will not forget the sacrifice of Christ, but keep the atonement foremost in our minds all the time. It also gives us the chance to repent on a regular basis, before sin can get a total grip. Think of it in terms of “3R’s” — Recurring Reminder to Repent.

It is all inclusive. There are two senses for this; it is all you really need if you have the death, burial and resurrection of Christ. It is also inclusive in that all Christians partake; it’s not just for the super saint.

It is particularly insightful — if you examine yourself as part of communion. Who knows you better than yourself?

The bread is his body; the cup holds his blood. Do this in remembrance of the Savior sacrificed himself so that you might live eternally.

DECEMBER 10

In the middle of the twentieth century the vineyards of Europe faced a grave problem. The vines were gradually succumbing to a vicious infection which rotted away the roots of the vine. No known cure existed. Various remedies were tried, but only one method really worked.

This method was particularly galling to the pride of the French. It seems that the American grape vine was immune to this disease. The only solution was to import root systems from America and graft the existing vines onto these roots. As Prohibition had just begun, there were plenty of root stocks available. There was nothing else to be done—if there was to be a continuation of the wine industry. Soon the French and others were industriously fighting the rootstock, slitting the tops and putting the old vines in. Tied with twine to make it permanent, this married the vine with the rootstock.

Our Lord was particularly fond of wine, at least as an example for his parables. This is probably due to the fact that everyone in that time knew how to grow grapes and make wine. Paul himself used the process of grafting as a specific example, concerning the church (Romans 11:21-24). The most commonly quoted use of this process comes from our Lord himself:

"Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself unless it abides in the vine, so neither can you unless you abide in Me. "I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing. "If anyone does not abide in Me, he is thrown away as a branch and dries up; and they gather them, and cast them into the fire and they are burned.

(John 15:4-6 NASB)

When you become a Christian, you join the church, the body of Christ on earth. He is the basic vine, you are the branch, and he expresses his "vine-ness" through the church. You go from a society that denies Christ into an organization that is his living hope for us. He tells us that we will bear fruit if we remain in the vine; and you will soon discover that fruitful Christians are those who are in the church to live in Christ.

Communion is an essential part of remaining in the vine. In a symbolic way, you take into your body the body and blood of Jesus Christ. How do you do this?

- First, you make sure the graft stays clean and strong. This is done by self-examination and submitting yourself repentingly to your Lord.
- Next, you take in the bread of Christ. It is the simplest of meals and the most basic of spiritual nourishment.
- The cup represents his blood, shed for you so that you might be forgiven of your sins. All who have a contrite heart can approach the Lord.
- Finally, look forward to the day when he returns to judge the living and the dead. All those who trust in him will be clothed in a new body. In the meanwhile, continue to take in the body and blood of Christ. Milk is for infants; this is the food of a grown man.

DECEMBER 17

Few motion pictures have flouted whatever guidelines there are for good taste, historical accuracy and sympathetic portrayal as the 2001 grade B picture, *Jesus Christ Vampire Hunter*. The title tells you pretty much everything you need to know. It starred nobody, nobody and of course as special guest star, nobody. With that, I have already talked about it more than it deserves.

But let us consider a somewhat different question. Suppose you are tasked with making a movie about the life and mission of Jesus Christ. You have 90 minutes worth of film to tell about the one man who has influenced human life more than any other. What would you say? May I submit the following list as being essential to your story.

- *The Incarnation*. What CS Lewis called the “supreme miracle,” the birth of God in the flesh.
- An all too brief summary of his miracles and his teaching would be required as well.
- *The Atonement*. The reason for the incarnation; Jesus came to die is the atoning sacrifice for our sins.
- *The Resurrection*. The power of the Holy Spirit displayed; victory over the ultimate enemy of mankind.
- *The Judgment*. The approaching day of judgment for the living and the dead.

And the “punchline” to the movie? “Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand.”

For most of the history of mankind, we haven’t had movies. We had to rely on ceremony and symbolism to betray the most important things of mankind. Such a ceremony is communion; the reminder of the atoning sacrifice of Christ. This is

so important that it needs to be taught over and over again. The cup represents his blood; the bread, his body. Taken together they are a picture of his atoning sacrifice on the cross. As was commanded, you should examine yourself beforehand to see if there is need of repentance. Then partake in the worthy manner prescribed. It's better than the movie; you don't just look, you participate. It's personal.

DECEMBER 24

If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us. My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.

(1 John 1:8-2:2 ESV)

There is a problem that almost every new Christian faces. You go through the experience of becoming a Christian, having your sins forgiven and being baptized. Everything seems wonderful! And then you screw up and do something wrong — you sin, again. One of three reactions to this event occurs.

- You may simply deny it. We are good at lying to ourselves, and you just simply say, “that wasn’t a sin.” Eventually the sting goes away and you let sleeping worms lie. Ultimately, this won’t work — but most of us don’t think ultimately.
- You may give up. You may decide that you are so far gone as a sinner that even Christ can help you; you’re doomed to hell. It’s depressing, but takes very little effort.
- You decide you need a good lawyer. Perhaps to your surprise, this is the smart thing to do.

The word for the phrase “good lawyer” in the New Testament is “advocate.” As any lawyer will tell you, you don’t want to defend yourself. As one put it to me, “anyone who represents himself in court has a fool for a client.” You want someone who can do what you can’t.

You have such a Advocate — Jesus Christ. And what an advocate he is!

- To start with, he is literally God's right hand man.
- He is our propitiation — he paid the penalty for our sin.
- John (his best friend) assures us here that he is "faithful and just" to forgive us if we confess our sins.
- Upon our confession, he will cleanse our sins as well.

And just in case you're wondering, there are no exceptions to this. Confession and repentance are what he requires, alone. The result of this process is that we stand in righteousness before God — Christ's righteousness.

Communion is not only a reminder of what Christ did for us to in becoming our atoning sacrifice, it is also the time for confession and repentance. Take the time to examine yourself, honestly and completely. Then see in the bread, his body, and in the cup, his blood, willingly given so that you might be forgiven. There is no one so far gone he cannot forgive. He took the sins of the world on his shoulders; he will take yours as well.

DECEMBER 31

The church has a history of about 2000 years; in that context 50 or 60 years ago is not that far back. If you were to go to a church in 1950 you would probably find something different about their Bibles. First, they would mostly be the King James Version. But you would also find many of them in which there would red letters — text set in red colored type. These “red letter editions” highlighted the words of Christ. In those days, the church knew that the words of Christ were the most important things in the Bible. They were therefore appropriately emphasized. The practice has since gone out of fashion.

Today is the last day of the year. It is fitting, therefore, that we have some “last words” for this occasion. The last words in red in these older Bibles would have been these:

Rev 22:20 He which testifieth these things saith, **Surely I come quickly.** Amen. Even so, come, Lord Jesus.

Now, it is obvious that our Lord has not returned in the last 2000 years. Perhaps he meant that he would arrive in a hurry, with little warning. It is a point to be heeded. It may be that the idea “you can always put off your repentance until tomorrow” might run out of tomorrows. So take this as a warning to examine yourself for communion today, and repent as quickly as needed.

Note the reaction of the apostle John. “Even so, come...” The desire of the church is always been for the return of our Lord, for in that time justice will be established and the New Heaven and New Earth will be created — paradise for those who love God and keep his commandments.

Christ told us he would not eat this meal with us again until he returned. Therefore, every time we take communion we proclaim the truth that he will return and bring with him the great judgment. So as you partake of the bread — the symbol of his body — and the cup — symbol of his blood — remember: He told you he was coming soon. Don't be caught unaware.